The Report Committee for Rhituparna Basu
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

The Revolutionaries

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Andrew Shea

Paul Stekler

Charles Ramirez-Berg

Nancy Schiesari

The Revolutionaries

by

Rhituparna Basu, B.S.

Report

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother, and my daughter. To my mother, for all she has taught me about history, identity, truth and justice. And to my daughter, in the hopes that she will take these same ideas forward with her, in her own way, in her own life.

Acknowledgements

To my family – Stuart, my mother and my daughter, to all my film professors at the University of Texas at Austin, to my thesis committee, and most especially to Andrew Shea and Paul Stekler: I sincerely thank you for helping me realize a lifelong dream.

Abstract

The Revolutionaries

Rhituparna Basu, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisor: Andrew Shea

This report outlines the creation of my thesis project "The Revolutionaries: An Untold History of Freedom" from concept to completed film. The Revolutionary Movement was an underground militant movement in pre-independent India which sought to overthrow the British government by force. The film interleaves the interview of an elderly ex-Revolutionary with a high-level history of this mostly-forgotten underground movement.

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Introduction

My mother is a history teacher and an inspired story-teller. One of the stories I grew up listening to was about a man who ran a tea-stall outside the gates of her college, in the small town of Midnapore, Bengal.

THE STORY OF BIMAL DASGUPTA

Big, tall, with a stern face and intimidating mustache, Bimal Dasgupta was a quiet man who served the students tea and snacks but somehow commanded their respect. Everyone in Midnapore knew him as "Bimal-da" – the Bengali suffix "-da" being a shortening of the word for brother, and used to convey both an informal respect but also fondness and familiarity. In December of 2000, Bimal passed away, and everyone in the town paid to erect a memorial to him: a 20-ft statue that stands imposingly at the front gate of Midnapore College.

The statue was not just a testament to the beloved place a humble tea-stall owner held in the hearts of a small town's people. In pre-independent India, Bimal Dasgupta had been a Revolutionary – member of an underground militant movement that had fought to usurp the British from India by force. And even by the considerable standards of revolutionary action, Bimal Dasgupta was a Revolutionary among Revolutionaries.

In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi had begun a civil disobedience movement. In Bengal, villagers joined in by refusing to pay tax on British salt. By way of a response, the British District Magistrate of Midnapore – James Peddie – ordered the villagers' homes burned down. On April 07 1931, Peddie attended a function at Midnapore College. There, in broad daylight, a 21 year old Bimal Dasgupta stood up, pulled out a revolver from his back pocket, and shot Peddie dead.

A massive manhunt ensued and Bimal went into hiding. Shifting from one safe house to another, sometimes having no safe house at all and living on the streets, unable to come home, or make any contact with loved ones or even other revolutionaries, and under constant lookout for spies - Arun Guha, an author and revolutionary, describes "absconding" as a kind of living death and one of the worst trials of the Revolutionary life (Guha 59).

At one point, while in hiding, Bimal risked capture and paid a secret visit to his father. The police grew suspicious after hearing neighbors talk about a late-night visitor, and Bimal had to leave quickly. Bimal's elder brother begged his father to give him up. If he did not, Bimal's brother worried that Bimal would inevitably be shot and killed by the police in an encounter. Bimal's father refused to give him up, and instead, severed all relations with his brother. The emotional price paid by the families of Revolutionaries was particularly heavy, even at a time when freedom cost dearly for anyone who stood up for it.

After seven months in hiding, and still wanted by the police, Bimal volunteered for another mission – more ambitious and almost guaranteed to be suicidal in one way or another. The European Association was a trade organization that actively funded and lobbied against Indian independence. Its headquarters were at the Writers' Building in Calcutta – the seat of the Bengal state government – and the scene of a famous Revolutionary shoot-out the year before in which Bimal's mentor, Dinesh Gupta, had been one of the three key figures. Dinesh's partners took cyanide and shot themselves before capture, but Dinesh's gun did not kill him. He was injured, revived - and hung. The Writer's Building incident had been a major event in the Revolutionary timeline. And Bimal had volunteered to write its next chapter: his mission was to assassinate the head of the European Association at the Writers' Building.

On the assigned day, Bimal's partners were delayed. And at the appointed time, he decided to go in alone. Ragged and mal-nourished from being on the run, he knew he was conspicuous and had little time. He quickly entered the given room and found to his surprise – two men in there, instead of one. He made his choice and shot the target (the correct one, incidentally) and was overpowered by the other.

Bimal's target survived his injuries. So the British tried him for the murder of James Peddie. When they brought him to trial, he had been so severely tortured that his father could not identify him.

Peddie's assassination had taken place in full view of hundreds of students. But the British authorities could not procure a single witness: no one, it seemed, had seen or heard a thing. The case fell through. And Bimal was spared the death penalty. Instead he was given the "Black Waters" sentence – life-imprisonment on the notorious Andaman Islands penal colony – a sentence many considered worse than death. He was released in 1939, when political events led to a release of political prisoners from Andaman. He returned home physically and financially broken.

Bimal Dasgupta was the rare instance among Revolutionaries who ended up with a sentence less than his crime. In the story of the Revolutionaries the reverse is by far the more dominant theme.

I discovered the history of Bimal Dasgupta and the Revolutionaries as a result of the research for my film "The Revolutionaries: An Untold History of Freedom." Thanks to my mother, I was aware that our hometown had some interesting stories from the days of the British Raj: the old man everyone called "Bimal-da" who in his youth had shot and killed an Englishman, or the family that came to an end when it lost both sons - a nineteen year old who was hanged for the attempted assassination of an Englishman, and his non-Revolutionary brother who was tortured to death by British police for

information. Their old mother spent the rest of her life sitting in the town square talking to her son's memorial, and carefully cleaning it every day with the corner of her sari.

I knew these stories, thanks to my mother, but I thought they were isolated incidents and knew nothing of the history behind them. I did not know the term "Revolutionary" or that these incidents were part of a wider, highly organized resistance called the "Revolutionary Movement." I most certainly did not know the place this movement had in the larger historical context. I thought that a film based on a collection of these stories would make an interesting aside to the familiar narrative of India's non-violent struggle for freedom.

After two years and the completion of "The Revolutionaries," it is no longer possible for me to consider the history of India's landmark struggle for freedom without the Revolutionaries and their proper place in it. I am astounded that I was ever so ignorant. But what is of more concern is how difficult it was to piece together this history. In India, the only people I found to have a comprehensive knowledge of the Revolutionary Movement – outside of the handful of Revolutionaries themselves who are still alive – were academics in this area of study. Among the general population, most were like me and knew of scattered incidents, but no one really knew about the movement as a whole or its place in history.

RELEVANCE OF HISTORY

One might ask why it is important that this history be remembered at all. It was a long time ago, a time of different social and political concerns. What is its relevance today? Is it not simply an indulgence in nostalgic patriotic posturing? I think, to be honest, there is some truth to that. Such redefining, "re-owning" of identity is a necessary part of a people's recovery from oppression and occupation. But that is a secondary

argument, the power of which fades with time. There is a stronger case to be made for remembering this history. First, I believe that truth is always relevant, simply because it is the truth. And second, within the context of colonialism, truth has a currency greater than itself. Winston Churchill said that history would be kind to him because he would write it. And so it has been for the history of the British Raj. In my high school history book, the British Raj spanned two pages, four columns of writing altogether. One entire column was dedicated to the "Black Hole of Calcutta," an incident in which 123 Englishmen died after 146 of them were supposedly held overnight in a small room by the Nawab of Bengal in 1756. The truth of this incident has since been disputed by various English historians who describe it more as a piece of propaganda deliberately exaggerated to justify the events which followed: the British East India Company having first provoked the Nawab, their host, by breaking an agreement and arming their fort, now went to war against him resulting in the British East India Company taking possession of the largest, richest kingdom in India ("Black Hole of Calcutta", Wikipedia). It was the beginning of Britain's aspirations for Empire. But regardless of the truth about the Black Hole of Calcutta, there were far deadlier episodes in the history of the British Raj. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, for example, was an incident in which British troops surrounded 20,000 unarmed Indians including women and children, blocked all exits and raked them with gunfire for 10 minutes. About 1000 people were killed that day (Majumdar 306). Of course, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre involved Englishmen murdering Indians. It never made it into my history book. But the spurious story of the Black Hole of Calcutta took up an entire 25% of the summary of a 200 year history.

Colonialism was a system of injustice and exploitation. The last vestiges of this system remain in the slanted and incomplete history its purveyors wrote. This history

continued to be perpetuated – not least, by those who had once been colonized - long after colonialism itself had ceased to exist. Truth – specifically, historical truth – in the context of colonialism is relevant because it is the last and most elusive step to final freedom. And the real end of the Empire.

HISTORY AS FILM, NOT LESSON

But my film "The Revolutionaries" is not meant to be a history lesson. That is to say, I do not want it to be. If the viewer takes away a lesson in history, then that is good. But the film is successful only if they did that by way of having enjoyed a good story. The lessons that stick are the ones we enjoyed receiving. We make them our own, because we feel we were not directed to those conclusions, we reached them ourselves. If people walk away saying "That was interesting, there was more to India's freedom struggle than Gandhi" I will be less happy than if they say "Those guys were cool!" This is because I know that if I can achieve the latter, the former is a given. But also because I would have successfully conveyed a different kind of truth - the essence of the Revolutionaries themselves: they were far from boring.

In the beginning of this film-making process, I was overwhelmed by the history. I felt a little bit like Indiana Jones, discoverer of an unknown history. And the first few drafts of the film were a reflection of this: I wanted to capture every element, every incredible, ironic, tragic detail and I had absolutely no idea how to organize any of it. But as I got over the awe of the "discovery" phase, it became possible to look at the information more objectively and think about story, and relevance.

The following chapters describe the evolution of the film – a period of two years - in terms of pre-production, production and post-production and my attempts to turn information into film, and history into story.

Chapter 1: Pre-production

As previously explained, my knowledge of the Revolutionary Movement was anecdotal. So an education on the movement was first priority. But this was easier said than done. First, the movement was a covert movement, necessarily secretive and not well-documented. Second, as a militant movement it was controversial, and conventional histories of the Indian freedom movement gave it short shrift. In other words, there was a serious dearth of readily available information, a condition exacerbated by geography – I was in the United States researching an obscure, historical movement in India. Rather naively, I was looking for a comprehensive history, and able to find nothing more than glimpses – niche histories about parts and periods and personalities from the movement. One such book was Peter Heehs' *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India 1900-1910*.

The book is a detailed account of the seminal event in the timeline of the Revolutionary Movement: the Alipore Bomb Conspiracy Case, involving the first act of revolutionary terrorism and the beginning of the underground. It also explains the significance of this event – an event that resulted in the first major state trial in British India - within the context of the larger freedom movement: the British had banned Indians from owning weapons after the Great Rebellion of 1857, and the appearance of sophisticated weapons like bombs in the hands of Indian nationalists was a major development. It changed the way the British administration saw the nationalist movement. Lord Minto, the Viceroy of India at the time, wrote:

> "… we thought we were dealing with sedition as represented by treasonable speeches and writings, but that the Manicktola Garden discoveries shed an entirely new light on the dangers we had to face." (Heehs 251)

More significantly, it changed the way Indians viewed themselves. The Alipore Bomb Case was a sensation. By the time it was over, the ranks of the underground had swelled and the movement had begun to transform from isolated, independent groups into a large network of highly co-ordinated cells. Further, the Alipore Case was not just the beginning of the underground; it was the beginning of the freedom movement itself. Until the emergence of Gandhi years later, the Revolutionary Movement *was* the freedom movement.

Then there is the figure of Aurobindo Ghosh. Primarily remembered as a mystic and philosopher today, Ghosh was first, the progenitor of the Revolutionary Movement.

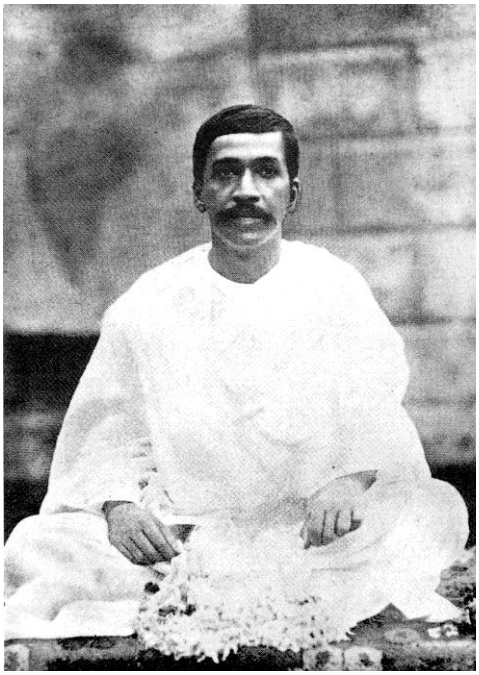

Figure 1: Aurobindo Ghosh

Heehs, an archivist at the Shri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, India, paints a fascinating portrait of the guru of the Revolutionaries – educated in England, fluent in seven European languages but unable to speak well in his own mother-tongue of Bengali,

he was a sharp and eloquent nationalist. In fact, Ghosh was practically an Englishman, except in his convictions – and to the British, that made him "the most dangerous of our adversaries." (Heehs 222)

One of the most insidious forms of colonialism was cultural – native traditions and beliefs had been systematically undermined as barbaric or unsophisticated. Ghosh, initially an agnostic, believed that the Indian people needed to reconnect and rediscover the power of their own ancient ways. They were weak because when the Englishman told them they were - they believed him. His studies in Hindu spirituality would eventually lead him out of politics and into life in an ashram. But while still active in politics, Ghosh used these cultural and religious elements to political effect – to create a powerful and uniquely Indian Revolutionary ethos and identity. Borrowing from Bankim Chattopadhyay's famous 19th century novel *Anandamath* – a story about a band of Hindu warrior monks who organize a revolution and go to war against the foreign powers that oppress the Motherland – Ghosh crystallized a Revolutionary narrative, a call to arms that was full of imagery of the country as Goddess and Mother calling to her sons to rise and defend her. The Revolutionaries embraced it, *Anandamath* became their "bible" and the song *Bande Mataram* (loosely translates as "Salute to Our Mother") became their anthem. So resonant and powerful was this narrative that the British banned both book and song.

Bande Mataram plays over the credits of the film.

Given the importance of Aurobindo Ghosh, it would seem that to not include him in the final film is a mistake. But the focus of the film in its final incarnation shifted significantly from that of the one I was still writing at this point. Aurobindo Ghosh was very much in this version. The final film grew much more high-level, and event-driven. And I still miss the presence of Aurobindo Ghosh in it.

Outside of historical context and the Revolutionary character as defined by Aurobindo Ghosh, what I found most valuable in the *The Bomb*, however, was the way in which it humanized the Revolutionaries. They are not depicted as two-dimensional heroes and martyrs who made profoundly prescient decisions that somehow magically fit into our present-day understanding of history. Rather, Heehs uses documentation – court transcripts, diaries, police records and newspaper editorials – to reconstruct the complicated, passionate, headstrong personalities of students, journalists and writers, all of whom acted in a given moment for that moment, with little regard for "legacy":

> When the prisoners were produced before the commissioner on the 4th, Halliday, in accordance with Birley's wishes, sent those arrested at the Garden to the Magistrate's court at Alipore … At one point he looked down at them contemptuously and asked, 'You think you can govern India?' One of them answered, 'Sir, were you governing India a century and half ago?' Birley left this comment out of the record. (Heehs 166)

My knowledge of the Revolutionaries had always come from those who considered them heroes. The Revolutionaries and their stories were sacrosanct to them. But *The Bomb* presented a different perspective: in a very real time of change and uncertainty, an atmosphere of violence and oppression and yet charged with possibility, a band of young men decided they had to act. They did not always know what would happen – if they would succeed or fail, if they would live or die - they just knew they couldn't sit idle. Suddenly, the revolutionaries were not the tragic heroes of a predetermined history, they were something far more exciting – they were human, living in a typically human world of uncertainty. And their actions were all that much more extraordinary.

Thanks to *The Bomb*, I moved from a hagiographic appreciation of the revolutionaries to a more objective one.

In addition to the historical events and personalities of the Revolutionary Movement, there is the issue of terrorism itself. The British considered the Revolutionaries terrorists. I did not want the film to go about arguing against this. Instead, at this point in the evolution of the film, I wanted the term to be explored – its meaning and its morality. What constitutes terrorism? If the Revolutionaries were terrorists, were they the same as Al-Qaeda? And – is there such a thing as justifiable terrorism? Peter Heehs explains it thus:

> Which brings us to the banality of the cliché, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." It is banal because the justifiability of violent revolt does not depend entirely on the perspective of the participants, but also the suitability of the means in a given context. Were other methods available that might have given equally effective or even more effective results without causing bloodshed? Were civilians needlessly endangered? Were innocent people targeted just to get CNN to send a camera crew? (Heehs xix)

So I had the beginnings of a history, a strong sense of a Revolutionary ethos, and a central issue I wanted to explore. But I needed characters. Bimal Dasgupta would have been ideal. But he had passed. In fact, there were no revolutionaries left at all in my hometown of Midnapore. In general, I started to feel like I was about 10-15 years too late with this film – the only Revolutionaries left alive would be those who had participated in the very last days of pre-independent India, a time when the Revolutionary Movement was on the wane. There was certainly no one left from when the movement was at its height – the days of World War I, and the early 1930s. This would prove to be a problem during production in terms of finding enough subjects to interview, but also in terms of the action content of the stories.

Searching online, I came across a government database that listed registered freedom fighters who received a pension from the government. However, there was no contact information. The freedom fighter's pension piqued my interest and as I read more

on that, I eventually came across a related newspaper article. It was about a handful of Revolutionary pensioners who had been invited to visit with the President of India in New Delhi on August 9th, 2010 in commemoration of the anniversary of the Quit India movement. The article included an interview with one of the Revolutionaries – Mr. Purnendu Bhattacharya. I was struck by the way he spoke:

> "I am so ashamed of receiving an honour for serving Mother India. Whatever little we did was from a sense of duty," says Prunendu Prasad Bhattacharya (90). (Das, ExpressIndia.com)

My mother helped me track down the journalist of the article, Sreecheta Das of ExpressIndia.com, but after several weeks of back and forth, she was unable to produce Mr. Bhattacharya's contact information. Instead she gave me the information for her government contact – and I found myself exchanging emails with Archana Datta, head of Press Relations for the President of India. I finally had Mr. Bhattacharya's contact information, and my first character.

It was October 2010, and my trip to India was imminent. The state of the film at this point was as follows: I had a very high-level sense of the timeline of historical events, a detailed understanding of the movement's seminal event, the Alipore Bomb Case, and two ideas I wanted to explore: the Revolutionary ethos and the issue of terrorism. My interest and focus at this time were on the latter two ideas.

Accordingly, the film at this point was titled "The Sacred Brotherhood" – a reference to the novel *Anandamath* and its warrior monks.

Chapter 2: Production

For personal and financial reasons, I had to complete shooting in November 2010 and within three weeks. Upon arrival in India, my first priority was to set up interviews with as many Revolutionaries as I could. But transportation and distance turned out to be a problem. I found that of the five Revolutionaries feted by the President in August, one had died and three lived too far away for me to reach. The only one among them I could interview was Mr. Purnendu Bhattacharya.

There was one other name that came up frequently during my stay in India – that of Sushil Dhara. Looking him up, all I could find was that he had had a career as a high-level member of the Congress party in Bengal. When I asked what his connection was to the Revolutionary Movement, I was told he was involved in the Tamralipta Jatiyo Sarkar. In 1942, during the Quit India uprising, a group of activists set up a rebel government in the coastal town of Tamralipto, Bengal. That is all I could find online. My limited literacy about the history of this period was a major hurdle, and the search to find texts to educate myself frustrating. As soon as I arrived in India, one of my uncles gave me a book – an autobiography by an ex-Revolutionary – that gave a detailed account of the movement's history. It was in Bengali. My literacy in Bengali is grade-level at best. My uncle shook his head and declared what a tragedy it was – if only I could read Bengali, I would have everything I needed right in my hands.

For the duration of my trip I waded through a quagmire of political bureaucracy trying to get ten minutes with Sushil Dhara. Mr. Dhara was in his hometown of Tamralipta, surrounded by party politicos. He was 100 years old, bed-ridden and slipping in and out of a coma. But I wanted to have him on film. I just had a feeling, a very strong feeling that he and Tamralipta were important. I got as far as a promise from his personal

secretary that he would call to set up a day. But Mr. Dhara's health was not stable and I eventually left India without having met him.

Later, when my research finally began to come together, I discovered Sushil Dhara in Madhusree Mukerjee's acclaimed book *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II*. The book is about the disastrous but under-reported famine of 1942 that killed millions of people in eastern India, and was a direct result of British war-time policies.

At this time, conditions in India were reaching breaking point due to her forced participation in the Second World War and Gandhi launched the Quit India movement. At the same time, the Revolutionaries began their own operations under Jayprakash Narayan – a Revolutionary and Congress leader. One of their most remarkable feats was the setting up of rebel governments across India. The purpose of these was not just to destabilize the British government, but to provide basic government services like law and order that the British had abandoned in these areas. Narayan's Revolutionary governments were based on the original one that Revolutionaries in Bengal had formed on their own – the Tamralipta Jatiyo Sarkar. And its head of Defense, the man in charge of law and order – and procuring food for starving villagers by strong-arming loyalist landowners with his Lightning Brigade militia– was Sushil Dhara, At the end of the Quit India uprising, Gandhi asked the rebel governments to surrender. Tamralipta was the last to do so, and only out of respect for Gandhi.

A month after I returned to the United States, I learned that Sushil Dhara had passed away.

I shot two days of interviews with Mr. Purnendu Bhattacharya. In addition to his activities in the underground, many of my questions were designed to allow him to talk about friends, his relationships, his thoughts on politics – I wanted to create a portrait of

that Revolutionary ethos. Of course, I also had him elaborate on the idea of terrorism, and this is included in the film.

But the final film is much more about events than it is about ideas. It does capture enough of Mr. Bhattacharya's thoughts about friends lost, his survivor-guilt, about terrorism, present-day politics and his feelings about taking a pension that I think the viewer will have at least a glimpse of the unique character of the Revolutionaries. But Mr. Bhattacharya had a lot to say, all of it rich and meaningful.

One particular section on the cutting room floor is one of my favorites, in which Mr. Bhattacharya elaborates on his feelings about taking pension for having been a freedom fighter. He recounts a visit he once had with an older, veteran Revolutionary named Satya Bakshi who was Subhas Bose's right-hand man. Mr. Bakshi at the time was old and ill. When the visit was over, he reached over to a table and handed Mr. Bhattacharya a crumpled prescription, and asked him to buy the medicine for him if he thought he could afford it. Mr. Bhattacharya's voice rose and cracked with emotion – pride, love, anger – as he said, "He would rather humble himself to ask me, his junior for a helping hand than take a penny from this government. Not this government. Never. He refused a pension." It was difficult not to feel something in that room, as Mr. Bhattacharya sat in angry reminiscence – anger and shame, because he took that pension, a pension Satya Bakshi would rather have died than accept.

There are other sections where Mr. Bhattacharya describes personal experiences within important historical events but they did not fit the high-level perspective of the final film. In 1928 the All India Congress convened in Calcutta for its annual meeting and Mr. Bhattacharya, who was eight at the time, was there, attending with his uncle, an active Revolutionary. While the Congress met during the day, the Revolutionaries met at night. And it was not uncommon for freedom fighters to be participants in both the

political and the underground movements. Mr. Bhattacharya describes seeing men like Bhagat Singh and Surya Sen as they made plans for the Indian Republican Army, with Singh taking charge of the western front and Sen the eastern front. This was about two years before the bombing of the Lahore Assembly in Punjab and the Chittagong Uprising in Bengal – just months before Bhagat Singh and Surya Sen would become legendary figures in the history of India. Mr. Bhattacharya was there, at that seminal moment. It was an interesting part of the interview for me and anyone who knows something about Indian history, but it did not really have a place in this film.

There are other gems I had to leave on that proverbial cutting room floor. Again, being rather vague on the history of the movement, when I shot the meeting of the Bengal Freedom Fighters' Organization, I took interviews of the members and had them talk as much as they wanted about anything and anyone associated with the Revolutionary movement in their family. One woman talked at length about her family's genealogy and mentioned dozens of names and incidents causing everyone in the meeting to nod their heads knowingly. None of it rang any bells for me. Another man, Mr. Dham, talked emotionally about his father who was involved in what he referred to as the Otis incident at Presidency College. I put it all on film, hoping that if and when my research came together some of this would have some relevance.

Figure 2: Mrs. Gita Ghosh

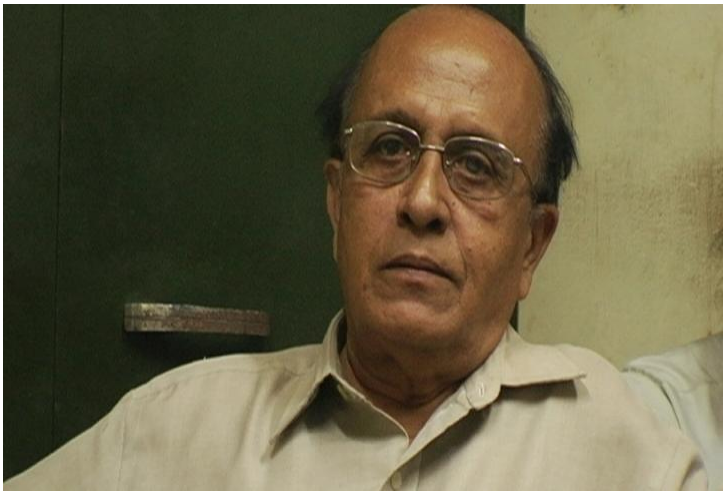

Figure 3: Mr. Ashish Dham

It did. The Otis Incident took place in 1916. Otis was a professor at the prestigious Presidency College in Calcutta and had a reputation for racism. Somehow, he got into an altercation with a group of students, and one of them, punched Otis in the face. In 1916 British India, it was front page news. And Mr. Dham's father was that student. He subsequently spent 4 years in prison. In another connection to history – a

young Subhas Bose was also implicated, and later exonerated, in the Otis incident. Mr. Dham said his father always dismissed Bose's involvement saying he was not there.

As for the woman whose genealogy I did not recognize – Mrs. Gita Ghosh is the great-granddaughter of Hem Chandra Ghosh, legendary chief of the Bengal Volunteers, the most active underground group during the 1930s upsurge. Most of the famous Revolutionary "actions" during this period were carried out by B.V. members – like the Writers' Building shoot-out. And so were all the Midnapore Magistrate assassinations - Bimal Dasgupta was a Bengal Volunteer.

The stories of Mr. Dham and Mrs. Ghosh are not included in the film because they themselves were not Revolutionaries. In the section of the film that covers the B.F.F.O meeting, I wanted to keep the focus on only those who had been Revolutionaries themselves. This is also the reason why an interview with the sons of Bimal Dasgupta was also cut from the film.

But the material I had to leave out is so dense with information, albeit, most of it second-hand, that it could almost be its own film.

Outside of interviews, I wanted to shoot a lot of B-roll material because at this point, my idea for the film was that the voice-over that would fill out historical context would be over present-day scenes of India, and not over archival footage as it is now. This idea did not pan out for several reasons.

Again, without enough knowledge of the history I was dealing with, my shooting was unfocused and I didn't shoot the material I now know I should have shot. I got some material – but I could have, should have, gotten a lot more. Second, pressed for time, I didn't always take my tripod and the shots I got were just not steady enough to use in the film. I cannot overstate how well this lesson has been learned – if you are going to shoot it, shoot it right the first time, or don't bother at all. It is a lesson I learned for sound – get

it right, there and then – and the lesson served me well on this production. I have good sound, but not great B-roll. I also learned to shoot a lot of action B-roll of the interview subject (this is particularly important if he turns out to be your only one, as in this case) - that is to say, it's important to have footage of the subject doing things and being in places different to those during the interview. I did not shoot enough of this material.

Constraints on time made it such that I went into production still not fully educated on the subject I was covering. This situation created lost opportunities during production and left post-production as the place where I had to build the story.

Chapter 3: Post-Production

HISTORY, AT LAST

After returning from India, I vigorously renewed my search for a comprehensive history of the Revolutionary Movement. I had more time at this point, and was able to dedicate myself to just research. I was very much aware that I was doing things backwards. Still, the film had to be made.

The first text I found was R.C Majumdar's definitive *Struggle For Freedom*, the eleventh volume in a herculean series called *The History and Culture of the Indian People*. Commissioned by the government of India shortly after Independence, the books were researched and written by multiple historians over a 26 year period.

Struggle for Freedom is a 1200-page tome that covers the freedom struggle from the mainstream All India Congress point of view. But the book is thorough, comprehensive and gave me a very clear and detailed view of the main historical timeline, including when and where the Revolutionary Movement fit in. Most importantly, its bibliography gave me references to three books that were exclusively on the Revolutionary Movement, namely Arun Chandra Guha's *First Spark of Revolution: The Early Phase of India's Struggle for Independence, 1900-1920* and the two-part *India's Struggle, Quarter of a Century, 1921-46*.

But these books I was interested in were very old, very obscure, and out of print. Majumdar's book itself had been difficult to procure here in the United States – and I was not hopeful about finding ones on the Revolutionary Movement. I spent at least a couple of weeks talking to specialty booksellers on the two coasts to find me copies of Arun Guha's books from India. One day, without any serious expectation, I looked up the books at the main library of the University of Texas at Austin. They were all there. No one, of course, had ever checked them out.

The library did not have Majumdar's authoritative series on the history of India, but it did have these three obscure books on the Revolutionary Movement. And they were in English. I couldn't believe it. The books proved to be exactly the breakthrough I needed.

As previously mentioned, Arun Guha was a revolutionary himself, and though he does not explicitly divulge anything about his own activities, the level of detail and access in the books suggest he was a very senior Revolutionary. The books provide a vividly personal and highly detailed account of the underground from its beginnings all the way through to Independence.

Thanks to these texts, I began to have a deeper understanding of what I had shot during production (which of course, further intensified regrets for not having had the benefit of this deep research before the shoot). In an early section of *First Spark*, the author describes the rise of cultural nationalism that preceded the 1905 Partition of Bengal and the subsequent advent of the Revolutionary Movement. One manifestation of this was the establishment of a National Council for Education that sought to promote native-centric learning and counter the effects of the long-running British-centric education system. This initiative was funded by a couple of wealthy aristocrats – one of them was Raja Brajendra Kishore Roychowdhury of Gauripur. I looked back at my footage of Mr. Bhattacharya's interview – Brajendra Kishore Roychowdhury was Mr. Bhattacharya's grandfather. My subject's grandfather was a figure in a history book.

After I had pored over these three books, I had a detailed understanding of the Revolutionary Movement - historical timeline, personalities and their very unique ethos. I understood its place within the context of the larger freedom movement. But I also had a whole new perspective on the footage I had shot. For one thing, I realized I had actually gotten quite lucky for having gone in so uneducated. I had definitely missed

opportunities – particularly in terms of B-roll footage. But when it came to the interview with Mr. Bhattacharya, I had known just enough to ask enough of the right questions such that I could see how Mr. Bhattacharya's experiences tied in with the broader history of the Revolutionary Movement.

At this point, I had just transitioned from knowing very little to knowing almost everything about the Revolutionary Movement. This condition had its own problems. The second draft of the film – the version that had replaced bad B-roll with archival footage and photographs – had the archival section as an 11-minute monolithic block of pure history. In terms of condensing, it was actually a pretty good accomplishment. After an introduction to Mr. Bhattacharya, the film charged straight into this section. And since everything Mr. Bhattacharya himself said in the interview now rang with relevance – all of that went in too with almost nothing cut out. All this made for a very long and oddly paced film.

It should be mentioned here that the procurement of archival material on this subject from outside India was extremely difficult. It is an obscure movement, and the material that does exist is scattered across municipal archives of small Indian towns, and in personal, family collections. There are no major museums with searchable online databases for this subject. But as I continued to edit the film, and the story grew more focused, I found I did not need as much material as I had once thought I did. Very often, in the latter stages of the editing, I found that the solution to problems was often to cut a shot, rather than add one.

The next phase in the evolution of editing the film was to break up that 11 minute chunk of history. I had to examine Mr. Bhattacharya's interview and look for a way to interleave it with the broader history. This was actually easier than I thought it would be. It turned out that Mr. Bhattacharya's personal experiences actually connected quite

directly with major historical events and personalities. In one scene Mr. Bhattacharya laments his escape into Bihar and his subsequent work with Jayprakash Narayan during the final days of the freedom struggle. He tells the story with much regret as if he side-stepped the main action. This was in 1942. That year, the Quit India began and the Revolutionaries launched their own campaign. As previously mentioned, a famine had begun in eastern India and the Revolutionaries had begun to set up parallel governments across India. In addition to general disruption of government functions, the Revolutionaries were also trying to work with Subhas Bose who was headed towards India with a Japan-backed Indian army. The man behind the 1942 Revolutionary agenda, the leader of it all – was Jayprakash Narayan. A key emotional moment in Mr. Bhattacharya's interview connected seamlessly with a major historical event and figure.

Breaking up the history sections such that they could be interwoven with Mr. Bhattacharya's own experiences was the last major evolution of the film. After that, most of the work involved cutting and polishing these sections.

In terms of the film's structure and organization, the film eventually moved away from elaborating on abstract ideas to focusing on events, and flowed chronologically. This was quicker to do than to organize by ideas, but also the subject itself was very action-oriented. Next time, I would really like to approach and organize a documentary by theme rather than events.

NARRATION AND THE TONE OF THE STORY

The biggest challenge with narration, after finalizing the content, was to find the right tone. Initially, I wanted a serious, historical, Ken-Burns-narrates-the-Civil-War type of voice-over. But this was not working - it sounded ponderous and overwrought. Yet I was fixated on this idea of legitimacy. The Revolutionaries were treated by history as sort

of the bastard child of the freedom movement. From the beginning, my purpose in making the film had been to correct this. Consequently, I thought of the narration as one that needed to have a credible, objective, serious tone. I came to realize that this just made the Revolutionaries boring. The fact of the matter was that the Revolutionary story was an action story – full of gunfire and rebellion. This was a guts-and-glory story and its credibility actually depended on it being told with feeling, not without. Is the final narration successful in this regard? I think it comes close.

Another concern with the narration was the narration itself. Andrew Shea, my committee supervisor, at one point recommended the use of on-camera interviews with experts to break the monotony of a single voice-over. Andrew was aware I did not have the expert interviews from India but felt that this would make a significant enough difference that I should consider interviewing academics here in the United States itself and use that footage. I wasn't sure I could find said experts here. But at the same time, I was not entirely convinced that multiple expert-interviews were a better alternative to a single narrator. Now, as I look over the finished film, I can see how that strategy could have created more energy, more dynamism to the story – something that would certainly complement the subject.

AFTER EFFECTS AND PHOTO-MOVES

Story-telling with narration and still photographs is the area I felt I learned the most in while working on this film. Many of the photo-moves did not come intuitively; until Keefe Boerner, facilities manager at the department and special effects expert, pointed out that Ken Burns – the originator of the style – used an actual camera to shoot the photographs. In other words, you had to think of the photo-moves as camera-moves: dolly out, push in, etc. Still, the psychology behind certain camera-moves across a static

image remains mysterious to me even when they work. This area has been a steep learning curve, but along with the research work, it has also been the most valuable technical experience I will take away from this film. It is an area I would like to explore more in future projects.

While working in After Effects, I did at one point run into a curious ethical dilemma that I suppose is inherent in all documentaries, especially historical ones – the issue of recreation: what is acceptable and what is not. In one section of the film, a series of newspapers scroll across the screen, headlines and pictures detailing various Revolutionary incidents. These incidents are real historic events, but the papers themselves are fake – I created them in Photoshop and After Effects. I had to ask myself if this was dishonest. If the viewer knew these images to be artificially created "newspapers," would it significantly change the story they took away from the film? Since the answer to that is no, I felt that the fake papers did not make the film itself dishonest.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In looking over the final film, I see all the material that was left out. In the beginning it was important for me to get the extraordinary history of the Revolutionaries out there, and for people to know about it – every incredible detail. It took time to realize that it was more important to get people to connect – and people don't connect to facts, they connect to emotion. They would not connect to history, they would connect to a story. The entire post-production process was in pursuit of that goal.

In general, this has been the arc of my own evolution as a film-maker in the graduate film program here at the University of Texas at Austin. I have always been interested in telling the stories of "the other side," especially in the world of history and politics. But my thinking five years ago was that the purpose of a film of mine was to educate people in one way or another. Obviously, that is rather silly and presumptuous but it is also a doomed goal – no one responds to didacticism. What I strive for now is to find a way to get the viewer to connect, on an emotional level.

Whether the film is a narrative or documentary – we are always striving to create emotional truth, even if it is in just one moment, one scene. It is validated when the audience responds. In other words, when there is an authentic human connection. Then we feel successful.

Is "The Revolutionaries" successful, in this regard? At this point, I don't know. I will know after I watch it with an audience, and as I put some time between myself and the editing phase I am just coming out of.

My immediate hopes for the film are that the audience enjoy the story, connect on some level with Mr. Purnendu Bhattacharya, and are left curious about this militant

movement and some of the characters I was able to introduce. On a more personal level, I would be gratified to know that Mr. Bhattacharya liked the film. It is my very small homage to the Revolutionary Movement – and to Mr. Bhattacharya himself: a Revolutionary and a gentleman. I deeply admire this generation and their values. Their imminent passing will be a loss to society, especially if we do not remember them and what they stood for. I hope that Mr. Bhattacharya can see this film and know that the Revolutionaries' struggle for a just world was not in vain; firstly, the world may not be perfect yet, but it is better than it was because of their sacrifices. And their set of values, that Revolutionary ethos – it is far from forsaken: it continues to inspire.

In the long term, I see "The Revolutionaries" as preparation for a narrative film I would like to make someday about the Revolutionaries involved in the Indo-German Conspiracy during the First World War. It is a story with tremendous dramatic potential, and to have the opportunity to turn it into a film would be my "dream project".

"The Revolutionaries" is now a finished work. With respect to my own evolution as a film-maker, I do not feel as if I am done. I have come a long way from when I first entered the program, but my education continues.

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Vita

Rhituparna Basu holds a degree in Computer Science, and worked as a software engineer for 8 years. An avid documentary photographer mentored by Alan Pogue, she entered the graduate film program at the University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 2007. Born in India, raised in Zimbabwe, she now lives in the United States and pursues film projects in politics, history and cultures.

Email address: rhitu_basu@yahoo.com

This report was typed by Rhituparna Basu.